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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CHRISTIANS FACE STRONG INTOLERANCE IN ADANA

REF: A) 2004 ADANA 149 B) ADANA 500

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Adana Christians are disturbed by the recent beating of a local Christian man, but do not consider the incident out of the ordinary for Christians in the Turkey's eastern Mediterranean (Adana, Mersin, Gaziantep) region. Police behavior toward Christians in Adana has improved in recent years, though Christians in neighboring areas are still being harassed by local authorities. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) In a February 2 meeting at the SOZ Bookstore in Adana, the leader of the Adana Kurtulus Christian Church Vedat Ozal told us that Christians in Adana were disturbed by the January 8 beating of a local Turkish Christian, but generally still feel safe. Ozal contrasted the anti-Christian activities of local authorities in the past, when local Christians were harassed and constantly watched by authorities, with the situation today, where local law enforcement authorities leave Christians alone and even provide assistance when asked. He attributed the improved behavior of police towards local Christians to Turkey's recent efforts in pursuit of EU membership. Ozal said that the three Christian groups in Adana have requested police protection since the beating incident. In response, over the past few weeks, police have patrolled neighborhoods with Christian churches and have sent officers to attend Christian services to act as a deterrent to further incidents.

¶3. (SBU) Ozal warned that the Adana situation is not necessarily replicated for Christians in the nearby cities of Mersin, Gaziantep or Adiyaman. He explained that local authorities there had locked Christians out of their own churches without providing an explanation. He said that one such incident happened recently in Mersin.

¶4. (SBU) While the behavior of local law enforcement authorities may have improved in Adana, anti-Christian sentiment in the local society has not improved. Ozal explained that an ultra-nationalist group visited his bookshop in the past year and "pressured" him by questioning his belief in Jesus Christ and asking why he did not believe in the Prophet Muhammed. He said that the group threatened to return to his shop to "bother" him further, but they had not returned to date. Ozal further explained that his bookshop is often vandalized with anti-Christian graffiti on the windows, and passersby often spit on the windows. Ozal told us that he and other Christians in Adana do not feel overly threatened by such behavior, and prefer to demonstrate a Christian, "turn-the-other-cheek" attitude toward those who demonstrate intolerance and hatred toward Christians.

¶5. (SBU) In a February 5 discussion with an Adana area part-time pastor, we heard similar positive assessments of police conduct in the last year, but also concern about ingrained societal prejudice. The AMCIT pastor related how in the last three weeks his dog had been killed at his house and a "mysterious, unexplained" fire had destroyed all the air conditioning and satellite television equipment for his home. "Someone trying to send us a message has identified our home and is trying to communicate something to us which I can only conclude is hostile," he says. "I am not the only person (in Adana) experiencing these coincidences either," he added. (reftels)

Comment

¶6. (SBU) Turkey's EU accession process may have caused some improvement in the behavior of authorities toward Christians in the Adana region. Meanwhile, intolerance towards Christians and other non-Sunni Muslims, such as Alevis, remains strong within private society. This change for the better in official attitudes here is not reflected in all nearby provinces.

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